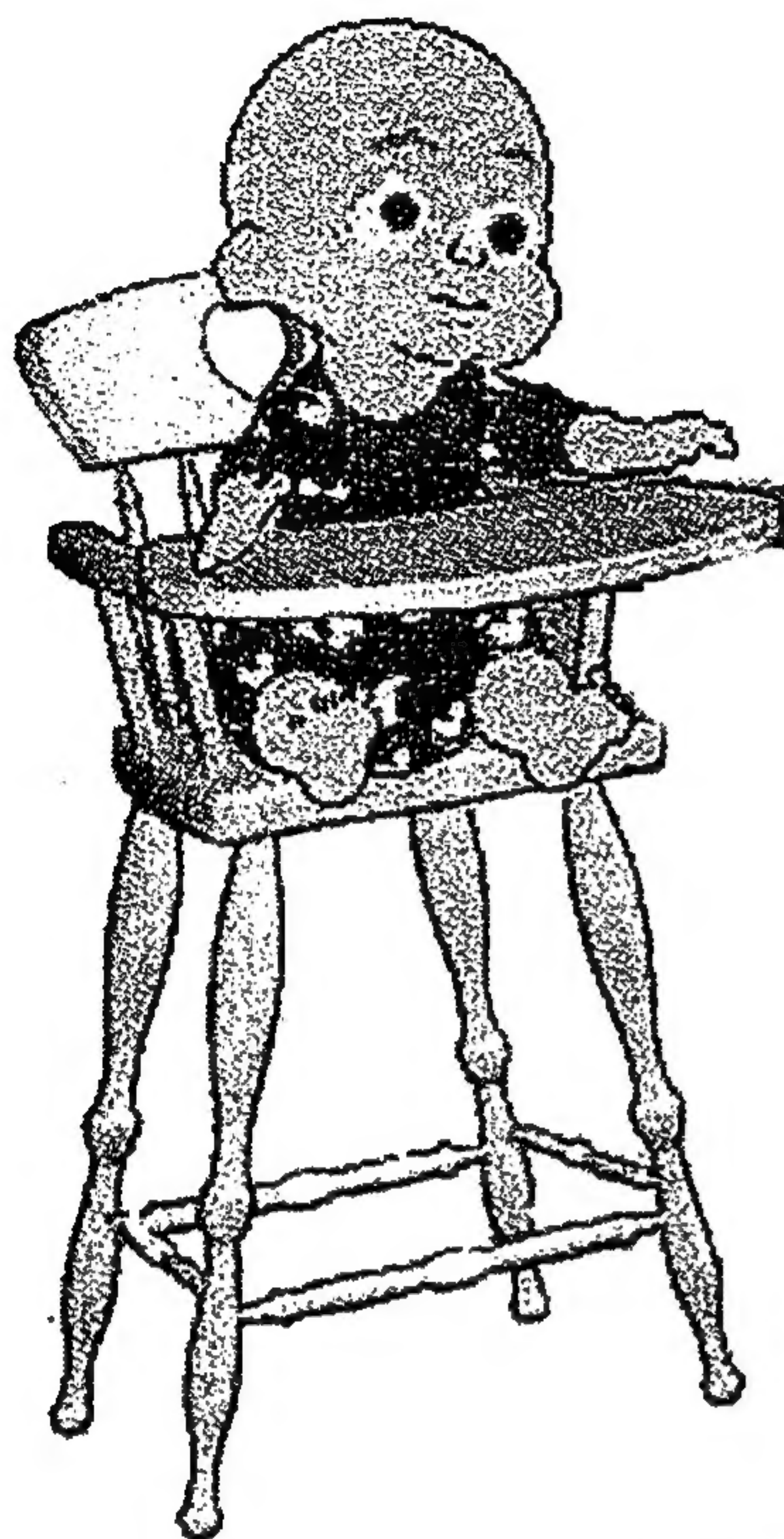# Time to make a baby

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A digital baby could be the first birth of the millennium thanks to the latest virtual life software to hit our PC screens from the makers of digital pets, Catz and Dogz.

The programmers behind the new

Early learning: go on, say "mummy"

CD-Rom software, called *Babyz* from Mindscape, are determined to ensure that the patter of tiny technological feet echoes around the world before the human variety. They've set their computers to spawn new life on January 1, 2000, at one tenth of a second into the new year.

Babyz, the first-born of PC computer software, has taken America by storm and is selling rapidly over here. The software generates irresistibly lifelike and mischievous virtual infants. Each is unique in looks and character, able to mimic a growing baby from 9 to 15 months, and can interact with its human parent. You can teach your baby to walk, talk and play, even watch it cut its first tooth.
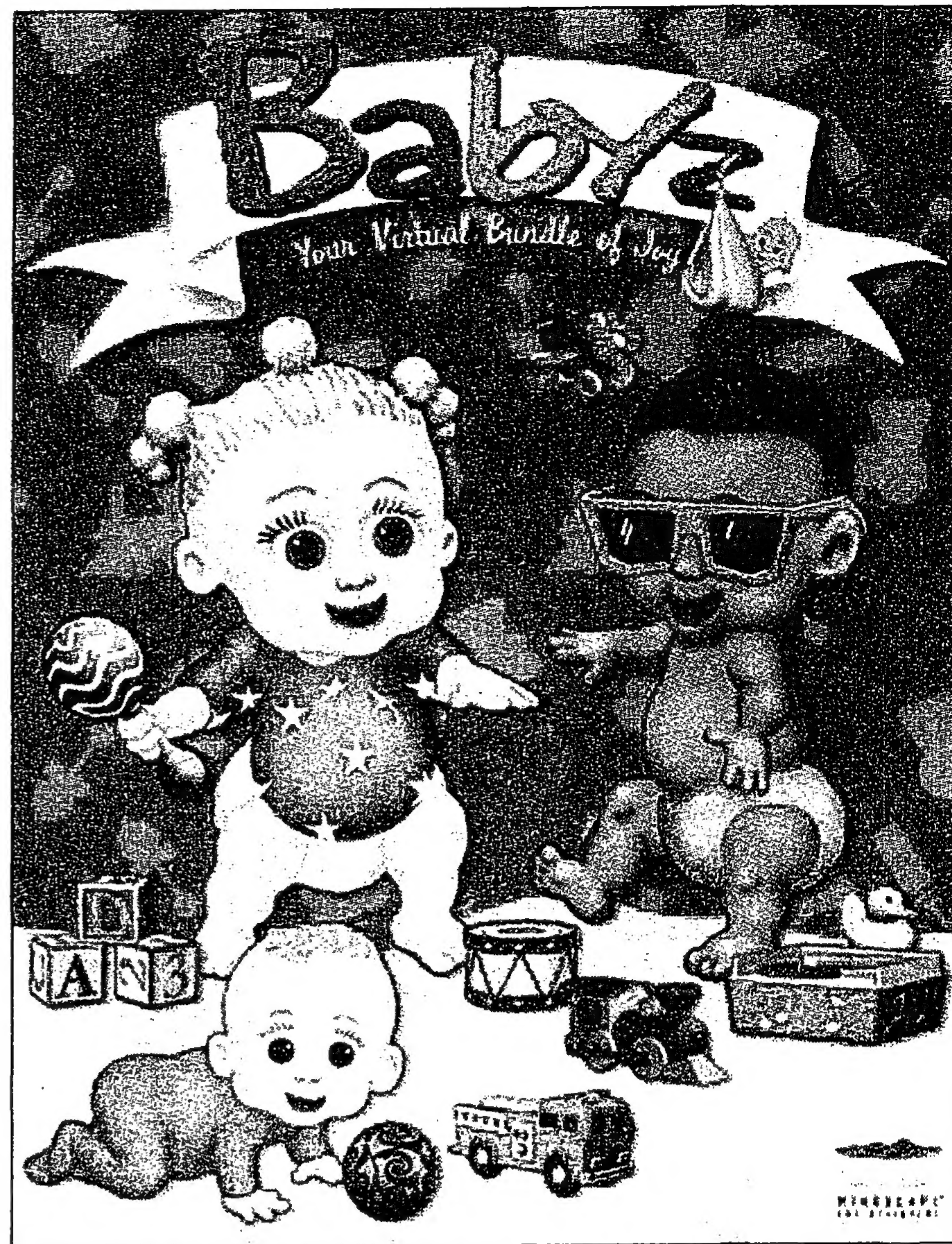
Babyz live in a virtual house in your computer. You can take them from room to room with the click of a mouse and play different activities with them. There's a playroom filled with *Toyz*, the backyard has a dinosaur slide, and the kitchen is stocked with baby foods and a microwave. Up in the nursery you can read stories to your Babyz through the microphone that comes with the package, teach them their names, the alphabet, and the words for common objects.

These adorable virtual babies are ideal for little girls and career women. Working mums can save their little darling to disk and take it to work — virtual corporate crèches are bound to follow — or e-mail the little rugrat to godparents for babysitting.

One warning though — the virtual

mess from digital parenting is awesomely realistic. Proud surrogate parents must be ever vigilant as Babyz are programmed to be as much of a handful as the real thing. If you don't keep them amused, fed, changed and cuddled, you'll be met with a full range of expressions, screams, and general naughtiness. Spanking is not allowed. Luckily, if parenting palls, you can put your baby up for adoption on the official Babyz website at *www.babyz.net*, and get back to partying. *Babyz* costs £19.99 from main computer and electronics stores.

For those who'd prefer an even earlier experience of parenthood, try a virtual conception of a designer millennium baby, and have a fantasy pregnancy without the swollen ankles and cravings to eat coal, at *www.2000-baby.com/eng/*. This magical website from MMM Interactive Communications allows you to choose the characteristics of your baby before it is born. If it's beauty, sports, rock or nerdiness you're into, you can have a kid to match. Just key in your choice, choose a name, hit "Make Baby", and in the twinkle of an eye back comes a positive pregnancy test. Forget nine months, your baby will be due on January 1. Until then you can tune in and watch your baby growing. So far, 100,000 virtual Millennium Babies are preparing to be born on the internet, and many of the proud mums-to-be are men!

● *www.2000-baby.com/eng/*

Screamadelica: if these tots prove too much trouble you can have them adopted

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New contest for unmetered access

Ben Hammersley
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It's depressing really: the final *Interface* of the 20th century and we're still talking about the cost of internet access.

Nevertheless, things are looking up. The weeks after BT's unmetered access announcement have seen many ISPs come out with even better deals.

The X-Stream Network announced the start of a trial of 0800 access to its UK users, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, without any requirement for

the consumer to switch to another telephone company.

The managing director of X-Stream UK, Paul Myers, says: "The ethos of The X-Stream Network is to drive the market in the interest of the consumer. BT's Surftime is too little, too late. We're offering free access without call charges because we know that's what internet users want."

For customers to take advantage of this offer they need to download some special software from the X-Stream website that displays ad banners at the top of the screen.

Not to be outdone, cable TV company Telewest has also announced the launch of a residential unmetered internet access service for just £10 a month — a third of the price of

BT's offering. The new service, called SurfUnlimited, will be introduced on Valentine's Day next year. Customers, however, will need a Telewest telephone line to access the service and must agree to spend at least £10 a month with Telewest on other telephone call charges, in addition to time spent online through SurfUnlimited.

Meanwhile, *Interface* post-

bag favourite Callnet0800 is increasing the capacity of its completely free network — having signed a deal with Cisco, and Siemens Network Systems, to help it out. It says it aims to start registering users, and their extensive backlog, as soon as possible.

Reports from users who managed to get on to Callnet0800 in the first wave of

subscribers have been favourable.

If you don't fancy the idea of one of the new totally free ISPs, you can always reduce your phone bill as much as possible. The more determined can now, thanks to Oftel, visit *www.phonebills.org.uk* and see how much their phone bill would come to under different suppliers. Then change telecoms company for the very best deals.

● *www.x-stream.com*
● *www.callnet0800.co.uk*
● *www.phonebills.co.uk*

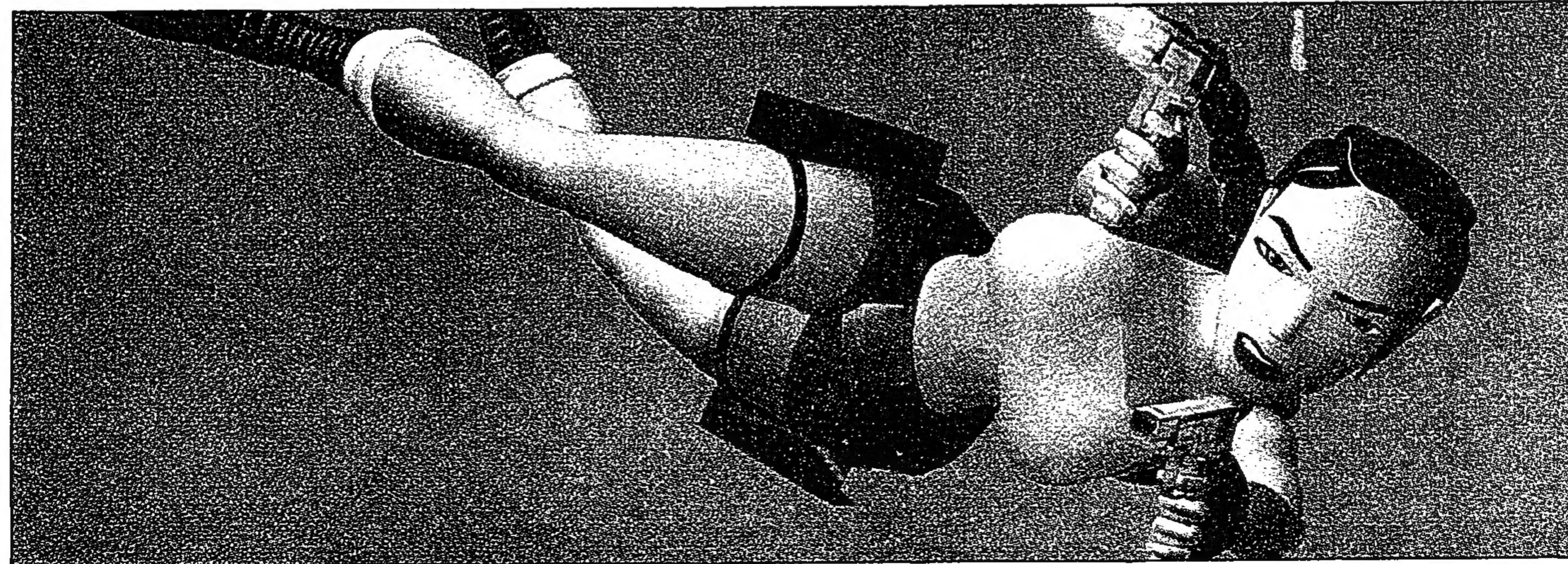# Lara goes on a special mission for *The Times*

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From tomorrow, anyone connected to the internet will be able to download a special *Times* version of *Tomb Raider*, starring video game icon Lara Croft and our own Editor, Peter Stothard.

Our man in Cairo sent Stothard reports of the discovery of a new Egyptian tomb, and the editor recruited Croft to investigate. The game is now available to download from *The Times* Lara website at *www.the-times.co.uk/lara*.

For those of you who have never downloaded a whole game before, you first need to check if your machine is powerful enough to contain Lara.

Core Design, the maker of the *Tomb Raider* games, including *The Times*'s version, recommends a minimum of a Pentium processor running at 233MHz, 16Mb of memory, all running Windows 95/98. Obvi-

Right on target: it's fun for all as Lara Croft teams up with Peter Stothard, *The Times* editor, to shed light on an ancient mystery

ously, an internet connection is also required to download the game.

You will also need to be running DirectX6.1 or better. To find which version of DirectX you have, double-click on the My Computer icon, then click

on C: Program Files, DirectX, Setup, and finally DXDiag.

This will show which version of DirectX you have installed. If it is less than DirectX6.1 you need to upgrade. To do this, just go to *http://windowsupdate. microsoft.com* in your web

browser, and follow the instructions on the screen.

When you are ready to download *The Times Tomb Raider*, point your browser at *www.the-times.co.uk/lara* and click on the link to download the program. It will ask whether you

wish to Open the File or Save To Disk. Select Open The File, and click OK. It will then start to download.

The whole game is about 10Mb and so — depending on the speed of your internet connection — will take about 1-2

hours. Do this in the evening, or at the weekend, and the phone call will cost about £1 with a standard ISP.

When the program has finished downloading it will install itself, and you are ready to play.

Some people may find it useful to use a download utility. These are programs that allow a download to continue at the relevant point if it is interrupted and the connection dropped. These can be downloaded for free at *www.download.com*. GetRight4.1, ByteCatcher and Net Vampire are three such programs.

For those of you who don't want to download the game, you can get one of 5,000 limited edition CD-Roms by calling the premium-rate number 09069 130 707.

Calls cost £1 a minute and will last approximately one and a half minutes.

● *www.the-times.co.uk/lara*